DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 451 535 CS 217 502

AUTHOR Rhodes, Jacqueline
TITLE Radical Feminism and the Subject of Writing.
PUB DATE 2001-03-00
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, CO, March 14-17, 2001).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Activism; *Feminism; Higher Education; *Writing (Composition); *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Feminist Pedagogy; *Radicalism; Subjectivity; Textuality; Web Sites

ABSTRACT

The radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as their online counterparts today, offer provocative examples of networked textuality, a discourse dependent on the constant and visible contextualization of self and writing within the discourses of hegemony. Given its potential use for liberatory writing pedagogies, it seems curious that radical feminism has yet to influence composition studies in any substantial way. This paper discusses composition and radical feminism, particularly radical women's sites online. The paper makes some of these sites "visible" to look at how activist women online move toward collective action through textuality, combining the relative permanence of a resource site and archive with the ever-changing association of hypertext links, visitor input, and guest commentary. It notes that the tension between fixity and fluidity in radical feminist writing mirrors another key tension in discussions of textuality and pedagogy--namely, the tension between liberatory pedagogies and material conditions. Bell hooks' concept of "engaged pedagogy" is key to an understanding of the potential for radical textuality in the writing classroom. The paper concludes that radical feminist textuality is a discourse of the moment; with its emphasis on both the personal and the political, the text and the network, it forms a particularly telling example of writerly subjectivity, mediating between the worlds of gender politics and print culture to change (and yet resist) both. Cites 12 works. (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 451 535

Radical Feminism and the Subject of Writing.

by Jacqueline Rhodes

Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (52nd, Denver, Colorado, March 14-17, 2001).

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
J. Rhodes
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

CS 217 502

Radical Feminism and the Subject of Writing

Jacqueline Rhodes
Department of English
California State University, San Bernardino
jrhodes@csusb.edu

The radical feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, as well as their online counterparts today, offer us provocative examples of networked textuality, a discourse dependent on the constant and visible contextualization of self and writing within the discourses of hegemony. Further, this networked textuality makes visible a local, situated, and *rhetorical* resistance at the same time as its stapled-together network invokes more global, or public, concerns. Radical feminists and their attention to text demonstrate how the personal intersects the political through a network of text; further, they show us an actively constructivist attention to political action, in that personal consciousness within a collective leads to collective action, which in turn changes the personal consciousness of each of the collective's members; that is, radical feminist textuality makes visible the interplay between writer and reader, relying only on a rhetoricized stability for moments of understanding and then action.

The radical feminists, with their encouragement of ambiguous and/or collaborative authorship, their insistence on the personal-as-political, and their use of writing to invoke identity, make liberatory discourse and materiality connect through the moment of text. The spaces between the personal, the textual, and the networked in late 1960s radical feminism find contemporary parallels in the particular textual ambiguities of online discourse, particularly as evidenced in the preferred medium of hypertext. Many feminists have claimed hypertext's malleability for their own, drawing connections between the constructive, unhierarchical "web" of

the internet and the "web-thinking" that marks women's moral development, at least according to cultural feminists following the work of Carol Gilligan; liberal feminists emphasize the egalitarian potential of the internet, which might provide everyone a seat at the cyber-table. It is this emphasis on cultural and liberal feminist values, rather than an attention to *radical* feminist ideas, that has steered much feminist compositionist inquiry. If the World Wide Web is indeed a "natural" fit for women, an anti-hierarchy with great egalitarian potential, then we should focus on how to get *more* women there, or so the argument goes. However, it is less the internet's *egalitarian* potential than its *subversive* potential that may hold the most promise. As Johndan Johnson-Eilola argues, hypertext "forefronts the interaction between social and technological issues in a way not normally seen—or not normally discussed—in the use of print-based, linear texts" ("Reading" 196). This emphasis on the situatedness of text and technology, as well as the rejection of a hierarchical information structure, can make the internet a particularly rich site for radical feminist action.

The emphasis on public, purposeful textuality was a hallmark of the radical feminist movement, evidenced by its textual beginnings in letters to the editor of the SDS (Students for a Democratic Society) newsletter; "An SDS Statement on the Liberation of Women," written in response to outrageous sexism at the SDS's 1967 National Convention; "To the Women of the Left," a 1967 manifesto written by Chicago women in response to outrageous sexism at the National Conference for New Politics, at about the same time that Valerie Solanas was distributing the *SCUM Manifesto* in Greenwich Village; the 1968 publication of the *Voice of the Women's Liberation Movement* (*VWLM*), edited by Jo Freeman; and the increasing number of manifestos, each one serving not only as a statement of a group's purpose, but also as a

statement of that group's *identity* as radical feminist. The establishment of a national textual network—and the increased emphasis on rhetoric as a means of group identification—did much to create a larger and at least superficially more coherent movement. As Freeman notes, while the radical feminists did not have prominent organizations such as NOW, they did have "an often tenuous network of personal contacts and feminist publications" that linked "thousands of sister chapters around the country" (103). Radical feminists made use of personal contacts and underground networks to publish their writing widely, and also to encourage other women to do so.

Given its potential use for liberatory writing pedagogies, it seems curious that radical feminism has yet to influence composition studies in any substantial way. As in mainstream culture, composition studies has tended to take note of the more "user-friendly" feminisms, namely, cultural and liberal feminisms. The particular intersections of liberal and cultural feminism, feminist developmental psychology, and composition studies, however, can serve to remove a sense of critical agency in composition classrooms—through the reification of the ideas of teacher-as-mother, writing-as-expression, and classroom-as-nurturing-space. If we wish to restore this sense of agency, radical women's textuality offers much to us as compositionists and feminists. Radical women's textuality, whether in cyberspace or print culture, emphasizes the idea of a networked community composed of writerly activists, who work individually and collectively through their texts.

The fluid textuality of the radical feminists provides compositionists with a view of Susan Miller's "textual subject," a subject who temporarily yet purposefully *acts*--and acts through writing. Miller writes that the history of writing is a history of increasing intertextuality,

an increased complication of the presence of the writer within the text. The subjectivity of student writers, according to Miller, is a particularly textual subjectivity, one that relies on fictionalized stability in order to negotiate the power relations inherent in a writing classroom. It is thus that Miller's view of the textual subject--as a writer who writes from a liminal space in order to negotiate meaning--can inform our own discussions of liberatory pedagogies of writing, particularly as those pedagogies are informed by radical feminist textuality.

Separatist Cyberspace

The cultural feminist interest in "women's space" and the liberal feminist emphasis on equity within existing structures has led to an intensive but limited examination of women and technology in composition. Much of the scholarly conversation about women, computers, and composition, like the scholarly conversation about women and composition in general, draws its energy from the work of feminist developmental psychologists, and thus tends to reflect cultural and liberal feminist ideology. Many scholars use the work of Gilligan and of the Belenky collaborative in order to examine how women's styles of verbal interaction might keep them from fully reaping the benefits of cyberspace. Mary J. Flores, for example, advocates computer conferencing that takes as its guide the Belenky collaborative's conception of "constructed knowledge," which integrates personal and public voices and allows students to "participate fully in their educations, as they are able to articulate what they have learned through experience and make connections with the knowledge and experiences of others" (115). Other scholars focus more on the cultural feminist ideal of women's space, a counterculture refuge from the aggressive public world of the internet, which is, for these scholars, gendered male. This vision of a sheltering and separate discursive space for women often comes in response to online harassment

in listservs, newsgroups, and chatrooms—the highly interactive genres of internet text. Frequently, that vision is accompanied by the creation of separatist spaces such as women-only listservs (such as Riot Grrls) and moderated newsgroups like *soc.women.lesbian-and-bi*.

In the particular case of radical women's sites online, the anomalous emphasis on direct action—and perhaps even public confrontation—creates texts that cannot be recognized as "women's" texts within the discourse of cultural and liberal feminism. My purpose now is to make some of these sites "visible," to look at how activist women online move toward collective action through textuality, combining the relative permanence of a resource site and archive with the ever-changing association of hypertext links, visitor input, and guest commentary. The radical feminist manifestos of the 1960s signaled not the moment of consciousness, but the moments of public identity—the moments when the consciousness developed in discussion groups made itself manifest in text, as part of a collective organized for social change. In cyberspace, that signaling of identity operates similarly, but the notion of "public identity" becomes increasingly ambiguous as the texts themselves openly invite reader construction, not just through different negotiations of links, but through the use of guestbooks, email contacts, and links to similar pages.

In Mimi Nguyen's *Exoticize This!*, also known as *Exoticize My Fist!*, the author makes no bones about associative political identity; in her "Original Statement," the manifesto-like invocation of textual identity, Nguyen writes that she is "(unapologetically) feminist, poststructuralist, [and] leftist," and that those ideologies inform everything on her pages. Nguyen provides a wealth of themed information pages (themes include "politics + activists," "pop culture," "allies + friends," "queer," and "grrrls + personal pages," among others)

containing hypertext links to other websites. However, more than just providing access to other places, *Exoticize This!* contains Nguyen's bibliographies, a link to her own e-zine, *slantgirl*, a list of Asian American feminist academics, and an interpretive commentary on every link that Nguyen provides. As Nguyen herself writes, the site "will always be under construction" ("Original" par. 1). Key to that ongoing construction is Nguyen's ongoing solicitation of reader contributions in the form of suggestions and site links.

In her "Original Statement," Nguyen tells her readers why she felt compelled to create an Asian American feminist resource site. In short, she explains, she "got annoyed" (par. 1). That is, she writes:

> I got exceedingly irritated trying to find rad Asian/American women's work on the web and figured everybody else must be sick of it too. So much for the Web's "liberating" p.r.: typing "asian women" into search engines will get you about twelve million porno sites. I want substantive and feminist girlie action . . . I want heavy theory mixed in with radical lesbionics, museum art installations and grubby print 'zines, and I want to find them all in one place! As such, this is way more than a link site since I'm having to write whole bibliographies, for instance, all by myself, for amazing women that aren't to be found, it seems, anywhere on the web. (par. 1)

From the time that Nguyen wrote her "Original Statement" in September 1997 to its most recent update in April 1999, it is clear that a good deal more "amazing women" have surfaced on the internet, given the number of links Nguyen has compiled. Many of these women's sites, including Nguyen's, exist as part of the "Third World Women Web-Ring," a metacommunity of

websites linked only by HTML and the loose association of identity created through sharing that webring.

Inspired by Nguyen's work in *Exoticize This!*, Susan Gallardo designed and still maintains *Making Face, Making Soul: A Chicana Feminist Homepage*. Like Nguyen's website, *Making Face, Making Soul* is rich with links to outside webpages, each one an identification of associations, a textual invocation of identity and purpose. The site includes links to a digital and public art project, the Welfare Warriors website, the Frontera News Service, library resources in Chicana/Chicano Studies, and individual web pages of Chicana artists. Other links keep readers within *Making Face, Making Soul*, serving as gateways to a list of Chicana/Latina academics and to a list of "Chicanas Chingonas," who are "Chicanas and Latinas who have made significant professional, educational, and cultural achievements" ("chicanas" par. 1). Gallardo's site is even more open to public construction than Nguyen's; she publishes guest columns by other Chicanas, actively solicits contributions to her list of Chingonas, and has an extensive guestbook, full of requests for information (which is provided, in turn, by other guestbook signers) and posts about the importance of *Making Face, Making Soul*.

Guestbook activity, while seemingly inconsequential, may sometimes be the text that keeps a website functional, and it is in this sense that the reader-construction possibilities of internet textuality may realize their radical potential. A case in point is the mostly defunct website of the Canadian Women Internet Association (CWIA) (http://www.women.ca/). The site offers a space for posting jobs and resumes, links to e-zines, an outdated calendar of upcoming events, a variety of information-link pages on issues including sexuality, spirituality, sisterhood, and motherhood, and an exhaustive collection of women's studies links. Slight

investigation reveals, however, that the CWIA itself no longer has a viable presence on its own site; on the "About Us" page, there is a note stating that the page has been taken down while the group restructures its aims; the note is from 1997. Regardless of the absence of any recent "official" input from the CWIA, however, the site itself is still active; the guestbook continues to receive posts, and the writers of the posts continue to respond to one another, providing introductions, information about website construction, links to other feminist websites, and information about upcoming events around Canada. It is thus that the initial goals of the website's creators—to provide resources and meeting places for feminists online—continue to be met, making the website itself a truly generative text, one that continues to be read and written even in the absence of its authors.

The 3rd WWWave: Feminism for a New Millenium is one feminist website that closely resembles the radical feminist manifestos of the late 1960s. The text begins with an invocation of identity; goes on to list specific gender-based grievances, most of which could have been plucked directly from the Redstockings' work; and provides several different pages on women's history, including links to outside resources such as The National Women's History Project; a page that talks about growing up female and provides links to information on body image, self-mutilation, and gendered toys; and a page of web resources, including links to e-zines, search engines, and women webmasters ("Women who've done it.").

The 3rd-WWWavers duly note that their pages operate through association and bricolage rather than unified coherence. "We do not agree about everything," they write, "*and that's OK.* Feminism was never monolithic, and it never will be. You will hear several voices on these pages; many articles speak for all of us, but some just for the authors in the byline. We hope our voices

will help you find your own" (par. 12). As far as its more conventional associations, *The 3rd WWWave* sits somewhere between the overt mercantilism of *Cybergrrl* and the leftist rejection of e-capital of *Exoticize This!* Some of its associative identity, then, at least in relation to textual capital, is ambiguous in ways that that of other feminist websites is not. Specifically, the website provides a "Feminist Bookshelf" with lists and reviews of books that readers have found relevant to feminist action, and then links to Amazon.com so that interested feminists can buy the books. *The 3rd WWWave* gets a commission on any book sold through such links, and thus supports itself without resorting to the random banner ads of webservers such as Geocities.com and Tripod.com. Its association with Amazon.com adds an element of textual control to the *3rd WWWave* site, much as the move toward copyright and paid advertising marked a move away from textual fluidity in the texts of the late 1960s radical feminists.

One purpose of these networked texts (and of writing them at all) is to openly challenge the seeming hegemony of the internet, to use writing as subversion even while it conforms, to greater and lesser degrees, to the textual conventions of its public cultures. Thus, these texts and their authors negotiate the terrain between insider and outsider. There are other negotiations, as well. Radical feminists mediate between fixed texts and fluid networks, or sometimes between fluid texts and fixed networks; at the same time, they negotiate the space between a textual collective derived from an insistence on the primacy of women's struggle and an ideological resistance to the logic of primacy and coherence. Radical feminist textual subjectivity exists as a response and a challenge to the networks of text and power that inform it.

The tension between fixity and fluidity mirrors another key tension in discussions of textuality and pedagogy--namely, that tension between liberatory pedagogies and material

conditions. As bell hooks writes, students rightfully expect "knowledge that is meaningful" and also that their teachers "will not offer them information without addressing the connection between what they are learning and their overall life experiences" (*Teaching* 19). It is not the case that feminist and other liberatory pedagogies *necessarily* work together. That said, however, feminist and other liberatory pedagogies have much to offer each other, particularly if current feminist work in composition begins to take into account the possibilities of a radical feminist textuality. Radical feminist textuality provides one way into an interactive, engaged, *performative* pedagogy that values students and teachers as textual, writerly subjects.

hooks' concept of "engaged pedagogy" is key to an understanding of the potential for radical textuality in the writing classroom. Engaged pedagogy assumes the personal on the part of teacher and student, emphasizing the situatedness of any writer or rhetor; similarly, radical feminism, with its emphasis on collaborative and networked agency for the purposes of social change, emphasizes the personal on the part of its practitioners. "Feminist education for critical consciousness," writes hooks, "is rooted in the assumption that knowledge and critical thought done in the classroom should inform our habits of being and ways of living outside the classroom" (*Teaching* 194). The "radical openness" of the personal made political in the context of a network of texts creates rich soil for resistance to the discourse of hegemonic power. It is thus that radical feminism offers us a conception of agency within the postmodern--not through the separate space of "women's ways of knowing," nor through an uncritical acceptance of critical pedagogies that can elide questions of gender and race, but through a historically situated and textually oriented approach to a consciousness of the "personal" and thus to collective and networked action.

hooks notes that cultural studies forms a site in which one can freely transgress boundaries; it is also "a location that enabled students to enter passionately a pedagogical process firmly rooted in education for critical consciousness, a place where they felt recognized and included, where they could unite knowledge learned in classrooms with life outside" (*Outlaw* 3). One purpose of critical literacy, then, is to place oneself and one's texts in context, as part of a vast network of possible selves and texts, each of which depends on shifting social relations and constant rewriting. Thus, to be an agent in this network is to be ever aware of the shifting, temporary situation of the text. And yet, importantly, it is necessary to *write* oneself into the network, to momentarily identify as or with some discourse or some other text; this necessity, as Miller writes in *Rescuing the Subject*, makes itself manifest through a fictionalized stability, a temporary textuality that makes visible the moment of personal becoming public and political. It is my belief that what the radical feminist manifestos and feminist heterotopic spaces online offer us is a view into fictionalized stability, a stability dependent on text in order for it to work and to create responses, answers, other texts.

In the space between private and public, personal consciousness and collective action, authority invoked and authority subverted, we may find Joseph Harris's "point of contact," a process of interaction and interruption that functions as the fictionalized stability necessary for writerly subjectivity. As Giroux and Shannon write, a performative pedagogy creates such a site. A performative pedagogy, that is, insists that we develop projects that reconstitute the traditional binary pairs of "margin/center, unity/difference, local/national, and public/private . . . through more complex representations of identification, belonging, and community" (Giroux and Shannon 8). The negotiation of identification, belonging, and community, is itself literacy of

networks, a rhetoric of collective identification. Networks and collectives are necessarily diverse, depending less on like-mindedness than discursive happenstance for their existence. While some networks do exist as part of a "community"--the example of the leftist underground network of the 1960s is instructive here--for the most part, their existence is always already subject to negotiation. In the particular case of the 1960s' underground network, radical women subverted it in order to create a loose national collective of increasingly disparate groups. Likewise, feminists on the internet have created spaces that themselves create a collective through anonymous or ambiguous participation. The points of contact in a network themselves constitute the network; it is through the process of using the network that one finds the temporary stability necessary for textual action.

It is perhaps no surprise that we have resisted the seemingly contradictory positions occupied by radical feminists and student writers alike, given that we are not always comfortable with ambiguity ourselves; we resist opening the site *between* as a place for textual action; rather, we wish to collapse that space or negate it, privilege the "resistant" site at the expense of the "dominant" one, all in the interests of an emancipatory textual action to come later. Radical feminist textuality, however, is a discourse of the moment; with its emphasis on both the personal *and* the political, the text *and* the network, it forms a particularly telling example of writerly subjectivity, mediating between the worlds of gender politics and print culture in order to change (and yet resist) both.

Works Cited

Canadian Women Internet Association. *Women.ca*. 1996. http://www.women.ca/ (5 June 1999).

Flores, Mary J. "Computer Conferencing: Composing a Feminist Community of Writers." *Computers and Community: Teaching Composition in the Twenty-First Century*. Ed. Carolyn Handa. Portsmouth: Boynton/Cook-Heinemann, 1990. 106-17.

Freeman, Jo. *The Politics of Women's Liberation: A Case Study of an Emerging Social Movement and Its Relation to the Policy Process*. New York: David McKay, 1975.

Gallardo, Susana L. "Chicanas Chingonas." *Making Face, Making Soul: A Chicana Feminist Homepage*. http://chicanas.com/chingonas.html (15 May 1999).

---. "huh." *Making Face, Making Soul: A Chicana Feminist Homepage*. http://chicanas.com/huh.html (15 May 1999).

Giroux, Henry A., and Patrick Shannon. "Cultural Studies and Pedagogy as Performative Practice: Toward an Introduction." *Education and Cultural Studies: Toward a Performative Practice*. Ed. Henry A. Giroux and Patrick Shannon. New York: Routledge, 1997. 1-9.

hooks, bell. *Outlaw Culture: Resisting Representations*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

---. *Teaching to Transgress: Education as the Practice of Freedom*. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Johnson-Eilola, Johndan. "Reading and Writing in Hypertext: Vertigo and Euphoria." *Literacy and Computers: The Complications of Teaching and Learning with Technology*. Ed. Cynthia L. Selfe and Susan Hilligoss. New York: MLA, 1994. 195-219.

Nguyen, Mimi. *Exoticize This!* 6 April 1999. http://members.aol.com/Critchicks/ index2.html (15 February 2001).

---. "Original Statement." *Exoticize My Fist!* September 1997. http://members.aol.com/ Critchicks/original.html (31 January 2001).

The 3rd WWWave: Feminism for a New Millennium. http://www.io.com/~wwwave/ (31 January 2001).